

# **Pandemic Flu**

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Disasters capture our attention when they occur but then fade just as quickly when our attention shifts to the next event in the evening news. Even the tsunami disaster that recently occurred in Asia which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of people has receded from the front pages of newspapers.

I'm often asked, "What is the worst disaster Western Washington could experience?" Not long ago my response would have been "an earthquake" because of the potential for enormous property damage and the number of injuries and deaths that might occur. But my answer these days is "pandemic influenza ("flu") outbreak".

I learned about pandemic flu when attending a presentation given by Dr. Jeff Duchin, Epidemiologist for the Public Health Department of Seattle and King County. Pandemic flu is not an "if" but a "when" event that is closer to becoming a reality than most people would think possible. You only need to read the papers and note the attention that the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) are paying to bird flu outbreaks in Asia to know that this is serious business.

I can imagine you asking, "Why should I be concerned about something that happens every year?" But this isn't just any ordinary flu outbreak; this is a "pandemic flu" outbreak. A look at history illustrates what the flu virus can do when it becomes pandemic. In 1918-1919 there were an estimated 500,000-650,000 deaths in the United States and a minimum of 20-40 million people died worldwide.

"But that was back in 1918", you say. "Today we have modern medicine so we're OK, right?" Wrong! Little has changed since then except an increase in the density of the world's population and an increase in the amount of international travel. We could expect that transmission of a particularly virulent flu virus would spread around the globe in days rather than months and the death toll from the flu could be expected to rival that of the World Trade Center disaster in every major urban area here in the United States.

I believe this disease is something about which we all need to become better informed. We need to ask what steps we can take to prevent such an occurrence and become informed about the drastic measures we need to be prepared to take as individuals, businesses, and governments to cope with it.

This is a disaster that would leave our critical infrastructures (even the Alaskan Way Viaduct) intact but would take a significant human toll and, ultimately, it is people who count. This is personal. It is my family who is threatened; my wife, my children, and my grandchildren are at risk – just like yours. Given the choice, I'll take an earthquake any day over pandemic flu; buildings and highways can be rebuilt – human lives cannot.